

THE MENORAH ¹

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From *The Bellman*

IT was a secluded little town in Russia, a town within the Pale — unpretentious, undignified. Very narrow and crooked were the streets; dingy and dilapidated, the low-thatched shanties; bare and bleak, the surrounding country. And the inhabitants partook of the pervading grime. They stooped in their walk, and stuttered in their speech — unerring tokens of the Jewish dwellers in the dominions of the White Tsar.

Yet the town did not lack its few aristocrats, its scanty patricians, before whom all the rest bent the crooked knee. But woe to the erstwhile Croesus who lost his all, and joined the tatterdemalions. The victim and his progeny forever after stooped in their walk, faltered in their speech, and no wisdom or virtue could raise them from the dust.

The town had its prying eye on the evergrowing list of the once mighty who had slipped on the downhill road, soon to be cast into the trough of oblivion.

Among those who still received the homage of the populace, but whose star was on the wane, was Lea Reb Kalman's. Her spouse, Reb Shloime, like Enoch, walked with God. His days were spent in the synagogue, enmeshed in a continuous maze of cabalistic hair-splitting. It was Lea who, living up to the lofty opinion of the Psalmist, toiled and spun for her household. The cares of the home, including the raising of funds, devolved on

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her shoulders. The town, therefore, brushed aside the master of the home, bearded Reb Shloime, who swallowed science and snuff to excess, and the family was universally known by the patronymic of Lea — the house of Lea Reb Kalman's.

Long after the demise of the first Reb Kalman, the grandfather of Lea, the town shook with the rumors of his vast wealth, the numbers of holy scrolls he donated, the silver and gold utensils that lined the shelves of his home. But grandpa Reb Kalman could not forestall the pending ruin of the saintly Lea. The family pedigree was rated at a premium, but the wolf at Lea's door grew more and more daring. Then, too, there was a marriageable daughter, but no dowry; a house filled with the furniture used by two generations, and no prospect of change. Lea's patience and self-control and dissimulation were never found wanting. The true situation had to be hidden from public gaze.

The very closest neighbors were kept in the dark. Lea blinded them by the only link that still bound her impoverished family to its ancestral glory, a seven-branched antique candelabrum of massive gold and of excellent workmanship which Lea placed on a pedestal in the center of the best room, to spread its halo of aristocracy over the largest possible area. This Menorah enjoyed a local fame, and from near-by towns people would often come to view the treasure of Reb Kalman. They entered the house with reverence and awe, and were sure to overlook all that was dingy.

Poor Lea played the financier, and felt the ground under her giving way. The store of dry goods and miscellanies, which was left in the family in her charge, dwindled away by degrees. What the town really knew to be her journeys for the sake of business were frequently no more than visits to some well-to-do branch of the family in a remote town. There she would give vent to her pent-up tears and beg a loan to uphold the family dignity, so that Reb Shloime would not be forced

to leave his spiritual heights and join the wicked ways of the pursuers of wealth.

"My enemies shall never live to see me go to work like Esau," he would often exclaim amidst a spasm of coughing. He looked upon Lea as the guilty party, and she could not but agree with him. Never would she have had the glory of being led to the canopy by such a saint, if it had not been for the rating of her family. She could not now drag him into the mire. On her rested the burden of keeping untarnished the crest of Reb Kalman.

Slowly the plaster on the once stately mansion detached itself from the moldy wall, and hung as if in mockery; more than one of the massive oak chairs and tables became wabby and was about to give way. Lea's eyes followed the ruin to its minutest detail; but she clung desperately to the many-branched Menorah that cast its soft glamour over the sordid house.

The eyes of old Lea gradually took on a hungry, startled look. Her body was undersized. The face that looked out of the white kerchief was pinched and furrowed criss-cross. Still she felt a latent power that might turn her into a giant at the approach of danger to her only treasure.

For interwoven into her very fiber was the consciousness that the golden thread which bound her to her famed forefather was so feeble, that she, and what was hers, might be instantly swallowed up by the crooked streets, initiated into their ragged fraternity, engulfed in their mud, wiped out — forgotten, forgotten. A cry of anguish would escape her breast, and she would gaze at the golden relic as at a living thing, so endeared to her heart. None would dare to impeach her standing with that talisman before her. Her husband must respect her. The town must not forget her.

Often, when the strain of making both ends meet became unbearable, Lea prayed only for a husband for her daughter. After that, let the Most High send what

He willed. The town called her the wide awake mother. All knew how she ran about, her kerchief halfway off her head, in search of a bridegroom for her only daughter. And she contrived to make appointments with the match-maker for no other day but the Sabbath. Then the candelabrum appeared more prominent on the silvery tablecloth, and radiated such awe that the Shadchan could not have the audacity to propose aught but the very flower of Israel. He could not for a moment forget that he faced Lea Reb Kalman's.

There had been times when it was not so difficult for Lea to keep the secret of her growing poverty from the world. Long after her marriage the house looked bright, and enjoyed many relics from the departed grandfather. There was a silver cup of rare design, the luster of which kept the neighbors for a long time from detecting that the home library of holy books was dwindling away. A string of pretty pearls hung from Lea's neck, distracting attention from the threadbare dress of *moire* antique. A younger daughter was then alive, a slender, airy creature who added aristocratic grace to the bliss of the Sabbath, when the candles in the Menorah burned brightly, each little flame representing the soul of a departed kinsman. Old Shloime did not cough then, and he paced the room in his Sabbath caftan, his earlocks dangling, while he snapped his fingers and sang aloud his greetings to the angels that bring peace to the home.

Through the arts of Lea, the final disappearance of the pearls and books had little effect on the neighbors. She had let them go so gradually, with such finely shaded diminuendo, that her reputation had suffered but little.

When the town was in want of some one to go the rounds, and collect for the poor, it turned to Lea Reb Kalman's. She walked from house to house, her ears tingling, her eyes aflame; and she collected groschens for the needy.

To the silver cup she clung tenaciously for a long

time; and used it, together with the candelabrum, as a stalking horse. The value of the cup was slight, but she dreaded its loss; and she feared Reb Shloime, who kept the mug for his "wine of blessing."

Once, however, when the younger child grew ill, Shloime noticed that Lea took the cup with her on one of her journeys. He fastened his eyes on her trembling hands, as she cast wild glances at the Menorah. For a moment he saw ruin before him, the devastation of everything. But she took only the cup, and with the little money tried to save the child, relying on the Almighty for the rest. When the girl died, and the mother threw her arms wildly in the air, and uttered her protest against the Lord, pious old Shloime shouted: "Silence, you have not sacrificed enough; you —" He was interrupted, for Lea was carried swooning into the open air.

Later, when the little corpse of their child lay on the ground, near its head two burning candles stuck into the lustrous candelabrum, and the assembled mourners, glancing at the celebrated relic, spoke in respectful whispers of the great Reb Kalman who died in the Lord, Reb Shloime felt a guilty shame, despite his habitual exaltation, toward his poor wife.

Lea would stay for hours near her golden gift, caressing it with her wrinkled hands, watching lest a speck of dust should dim its gloss. Every Friday, at sundown, as she stood with her face covered by her hands, murmuring her prayers over the lighted candles, she also prayed for the soul of the departed child. Then her husband's harsh words would suddenly startle her, "You have not sacrificed enough," and she would turn from the candelabrum, her face livid, her breast heaving.

One day, Lea returned from one of her journeys with a fire in her dimmed eyes that Shloime had never noticed before. In tones that sounded to him at first like an apology, and then like an atonement, she spoke of good news.

"A young man of birth, a family of means," she re-

lated with scanty breath,—“an excellent match for our daughter. They wanted such high dowry. But thank God, as soon as you acquiesce we shall have her betrothed.”

Reb Shloime marveled at her abrupt speech. Even he noticed that Lea's lips were parched, her eyes aflame, and that she spoke as if she had swallowed her sobs. But he ascribed it all to the excitement of leading a daughter to the canopy.

For the first time since her marriage, Lea had a secret which she kept from her husband. She was aware that she could not ward off the inevitable. Soon, not only her husband, the entire town, would learn of her fall. Her little body was shaken by a chill that ran from the roots of her hair to the tips of her fingers. Her teeth chattered in her mouth with the effort to keep from shouting the terrible secret at the top of her voice. But her trembling old lips moved in a whisper, in a continuous mumble: “O Lord of my fathers, O dear God, you know a mother's heart — I had to sell grandpa's Menorah, my magic Menorah.”

Shloime could not make out her incoherent cry at night, “I did not have enough for the dowry.”

It was one of her relatives on the paternal side who had bought Reb Kalman's legacy, the candelabrum, yielding to the condition that Lea should keep the treasure till after her daughter's betrothal.

In a frenzy, Lea had run to the tailor's long before it was time. While her husband was away at the synagogue, celebrating with his cronies, she was afraid to stay alone at the house with the treasure that was no longer hers. She managed to spend the days before the ceremony amid the rustle of linens, the clicking of scissors, the flying of needles.

The night of the wedding, she frisked about and danced so wildly that the guests eyed one another in astonishment. Even at “the covering of the bride,” when the young girl sheds tears under her veil, while the bard,

accompanied by the sighing violins and the wails of the women, speaks of happiness and misery, of life and death—even then Lea stood with eyes dry and staring.

Only for a moment her face contracted spasmodically, as she imagined that she was the cause of the wailing; even as the Talmud says: “Yea, the poor are likened unto the dead.” Better had she been now a corpse—she, the daughter of Israel who reduced her learned spouse to penury; she, who was no more the aristocratic Lea Reb Kalman’s. With an effort she straightened up, for fear that her husband might suspect something. She recalled a song she knew in her childhood, and, placing herself before the bride, she sang in a falsetto:

And when you depart hence,
And when you depart,—
Oh, think how lonely you leave me.

And Reb Shloime, with eyes somewhat the worse for the wine, looked shyly at her and laughed hoarsely, and nudged his neighbors, with the incessant remark: “Is n’t she as blooming as a bride? As I am a Jew, she looks as young as a bride!”